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A Gloss on a Review of *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* by Sławomir Łotysz

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Abstract

The article is a gloss on a review of the monograph *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [The Pinsk Marshes: Nature, Knowledge, and Politics in Polish Polesia before 1945] by Sławomir Łotysz, which appears in this issue of *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*.

Keywords: gloss; review; *Pińskie błota*; Polesia; postcolonialism

Postcolonial studies, understood as an interdisciplinary research perspective (see Domańska, 2008a, p. 158), are a point of reference for the analysis of various forms of domination and subordination, and above all, the exercise of colonial power by means of produced knowledge. This perspective in the study of European internal colonialism has

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a tradition going back almost three decades,[1] and since the turn of the century it has also been a theoretical context for the analysis of the colonizing/colonized condition of Polish culture (Domańska, 2008b). In his book *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* [The Pinsk Marshes: Nature, Knowledge, and Politics in Polish Polesia before 1945], Sławomir Łotysz implicitly continues this tradition: he analyzes the environmental, economic, cultural, and political components of the colonial discourse of the Second Polish Republic (Łotysz, 2022). I offer here some reflections on a review of his book which appears in this issue of *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria Nowa* (Cichoracki, 2023). **They only concern the research perspective**, its misunderstanding or alternative "understanding".

The reviewer's main objection is that the relations between the Polish state and its eastern peripheries cannot be interpreted as "'colonial' in nature". This objection demonstrates a failure to recognize the theoretical context mentioned above. The reviewer – quoting a passage where the author associates the attitude of the Polish elite towards the Poleshuks with racism – reduces colonialism to racist policy and thus argues that Łotysz's interpretation is unjustified. At the same time, however, he loses sight of the main topic of the book: Polish "knowledge and politics" in Polesia, which, as Łotysz demonstrates, drew on a repertoire of stereotypes and self-stereotypes common in representations of center-periphery and us-others worldwide (which are also the subject of postcolonial diagnoses). One case in point is the motif of dehumanizing the colonized subject, by means of which the center justified its civilizational mission: the policy of domination, violence, and exploitation of the periphery. Incidentally, it seems that the reviewer does not take into account the role of knowledge in the colonization process, which is an important research problem both for postcolonial approaches and for the author of *Pińskie błota*.

The postcolonial perspective asks about the possibility of describing and understanding the subaltern and their worldview.[2] In this vain, Łotysz, in the absence of access to the self-representation of the Poleshuks, tries to understand the reasons for their resistance to modernization and Polonization, pointing out, among other factors, the social and economic gap between the peasantry and the Polish/Polonized nobility in the province. It seems that the reviewer does not want to notice this change in approach, and assumes the role of an advocate of the administration of the Second Republic, which viewed ethnic minorities as a source of instability in the country.

The review highlights the priorities of the Second Republic behind its repressive policy towards minorities: to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the state, and to overcome the existing division of the country into modern and underdeveloped areas. However, this begs the question: could internal security and modernization of the state have been achieved through emancipation of ethnic minorities rather than their suppression?

1 See, for example, Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff, 1994), inspired by Edward Said's *Orientalism*; see also Bakuła (2011).

2 I refer to the classic essay by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (Spivak, 1988).

This issue is not considered in the review because it is not part of the adopted perspective – the review and the book by Łotysz belong to two different epistemological orders. What in the author's view comes as evidence of the suppression of local culture through its subordination and uprooting, is interpreted by the reviewer as a sign of the emancipation of the Poleshuks and the inclusiveness (sic!) of the Polish state: "The 'Poleshuk', by becoming Polish, was to be granted access to all the privileges enjoyed by members of the ruling nation." It is obvious that offering access to social advancement and participation in the structures of the state only to those who would reject their non-Polish ethnic identity was at odds with inclusiveness (and this is not about epistemological differences, but about a wrong understanding of the concept).

Sławomir Łotysz sets himself the task of understanding the interplay of political, intellectual, economic, and ecological processes in the production and reproduction of domination and control over Polesia and its inhabitants. In his approach, it is crucial that the field of research should include the actors who are marginalized in state-centric historiography: the Poleshuks and their environment. The review of *Pińskie błota* does not take into account the point of view from which the author rewrites the history of Polesia. Rather, the reviewer strenuously attempts to make history writing revert to the perspective of the state center.

Translated by Piotr Styk

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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest glossą do recenzji monografii *Pińskie błota: Natura, wiedza i polityka na polskim Polesiu do 1945 roku* autorstwa Sławomira Łotysza, która została opublikowana w niniejszym numerze czasopisma *Sprawy Narodowościowe: Seria nowa*.

Słowa kluczowe: glossa; recenzja; *Pińskie błota*; Polesie; postkolonializm

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